

Message Text

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ACTION EA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 SSO-00

USIE-00 INRE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-10 L-03 NSC-07 PA-04

RSC-01 PRS-01 SP-03 SS-20 IO-14 AID-20 DRC-01 DPW-01

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O R 291105Z APR 74

FM AMEMBASSY SAIGON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4187

INFO AMCONSUL BIEN HOA

AMCONSUL CAN THO

AMCONSUL DANANG

AMCONSUL NHA TRANG

CINCPAC

USDEL JEC PARIS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SAIGON 5580

E.O. 11652 GDS

TAGS: PINS, PINT, VS

SUBJECT: ALLEGED IMPRISONMENT OF BUDDHIST MONKS

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

REF: (A) SAIGON 3567; (B) STATE 84428; (C) SAIGON 5461;
(D) STATE 86008

1. THE FOLLOWING IS OUR BEST CURRENT INFORMATION ON RECENT
ALLEGATIONS OF IMPRISONMENT OF BUDDHIST MONKS:

2. NUMBERS IN PRISON. IT IS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO DETERMINE
HOW MANY BUDDHIST MONKS MAY BE IN PRISON (THOUGH SOME AN QUANG
SOURCES GIVE THE NUMBER AS IN THE HUNDREDS) BECAUSE THERE ARE
DIFFERING INTERPRETATIONS OF WHO IS AND WHO IS NOT A BUDDHIST
MONK. AMONG THE SUPPOSED MONKS IN CHI HOA PRISON, THERE IS A
SIGNIFICANT BUT UNKNOWN NUMBER WHO CANNOT BE CONSIDERED GENUINE
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MONKS BUT DRAFT DODGERS POSING AS MONKS. DISTINGUISHING

BETWEEN REAL AND FALSE MONKS IS DIFFICULT BECAUSE, AMONG OTHER REASONS, BUDDHIST STANDARDS FOR REGISTERING AS A MONK ARE NOT RIGIDLY APPLIED AND VARY FROM PAGODA TO PAGODA. THE GOVERNMENT FIRMLY HOLDS THAT THE "MONKS" INVOLVED IN RECENT "FASTING" EPISODE ARE ALL GUILTY OF DRAFT EVASION.

3. THE "FASTING" EPISODE. THE HUNGER STRIKE TURNS OUT TO HAVE BEEN LARGELY A MYTH. THE DIRECTOR OF CABINET OF THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR HAS ASSURED US ON TWO SEPARATE OCCASIONS THAT THESE "FASTING" PRISONERS ARE EATING REGULARLY. AT FIRST, HE SAID, THEY REFUSED PRISON FOOD BUT ATE FOOD SUPPLIED BY THEIR FAMILIES. LATER, THEY AGAIN ATE EVEN PRISON FOOD. WE NOTE THAT EVEN THE STORIES EMANATING FROM SUCH AGITATORS AS MRS. NGO BA THANH, VENERABLE PHAP LAN, AND THEIR ALLIES ABROAD ARE VAGUE AND AMBIGUOUS ON THE "FASTING" ASPECT.

4. ON MARCH 11, A GROUP OF OPPOSITION POLITICAL FIGURES INCLUDING VENERABLE PHAP LAN AND MRS. NGO BA THANH WENT TO CHI HOA. PRESS REPRESENTATIVES, TIPPED OFF IN ADVANCE, ACCOMPANIED THE GROUP. THE GROUP, WHICH SOUGHT TO TURN THE VISIT INTO A PUBLIC DEMONSTRATION, WAS NOT ALLOWED INTO THE PRISON. THIS INCIDENT WAS THE OPENING CHAPTER OF THE CURRENT PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN ABOUT THE "300 FASTING BUDDHIST MONKS" WHICH HAS RECEIVED SO MUCH ATTENTION IN THE WESTERN PRESS. (WE KNOW NOTHING OF A SEPARATE VISIT TO CHI HOA BY OPPOSITION SENATORS. SENATORS AND/OR DEPUTIES APPARENTLY WENT ALONG ON THE MARCH 11 TRIP, WHICH AS FAR AS WE CAN TELL WAS THE ONLY SUCH VISIT.)

5. RAID ON LONG AN PAGODA. THE MARCH 12 POLICE RAID ON THE PAGODA IN LONG AN (SEE REF A AND SUBSEQUENT REPORTING) HAS ALSO BEEN EXPLOITED FOR PROPAGANDA CHARGING GOVERNMENT ABUSE OF BUDDHIST MONKS. WE BELIEVE OUR EARLIER REPORTS CORRECTLY RECORD WHAT HAPPENED, ALTHOUGH REPORTS VARIED SOMEWHAT ON THE NUMBERS OF PERSONS WHO WERE RELEASED OR ARRESTED AFTER SCREENING. ACCORDING TO INFORMATION WE BELIEVE RELIABLE, 152 PERSONS INITIALLY WERE ARRESTED OF WHOM 74 WERE CHARGED AS DRAFT DODGERS, 62 OTHERWISE HAD FALSE IDENTITIES, ONE WAS A DESERTER DELIVERED BACK TO HIS UNIT, AND 15 WERE FREED.

6 A LAY LEADER OF THE AN QUANG FACTION TOLD AN EMBOFF APRIL 28
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THAT THIS LONG AN PAGODA HAS BEEN A CENTER FOR ILLEGAL DRAFT EVASION. A DAMLADING BONZE OF AN QUANG RECENTLY TOLD US THAT THE PROBLEM OF DRAFT DODGERS POSING AS MONKS IS A REAL ONE, AND THAT THE GOVT HAS EVERY RIGHT TO MOVE AGAINST SUCH PERSONS. WE BELIEVE EVEN MRS. NGO BA THANH AND THE AN QUANG MILITANTS ARE QUITE AWARE OF THE PREVALENCE OF THIS FRAUDULENT PRACTICE, THOUGH THEY OF COURSE WOULD NOT ADMIT IT PUBLICLY.

7. AN QUANG EXTREMISTS EXPLOIT SITUATION. THE EXTREMIST SWING OF QN QUANG, REPRESENTED AMONG OTHERS BY VENERABLE PHAP LAN, HAS SET OUT TO EXPLOIT THIS ISSUE FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES. MR. NGO BA THANH AND OTHER SELF-STYLED MEMBERS OF THE "THIRD FORCE" RECENTLY JOINED FORCES WITH THEM AND A CAMPAIGN OF AGITSTION AND PUBLICITY AGAINST THE GOVT IS UNDERWAY. PHAP LAN'S "COMMITTEE

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FOR THE RELEASE OF BUDDHIST PRISONERS" IS THE VEHICLE, AS WELL AS ANOTHER SEPARATE ORGANIZATION CALLED THE "COMMITTEE TO RECEIVE PRISONERS OF THE THIRD FORCE" LAUNCHED BY LAN, MRS. NGO BA THANH, TRAN NGOC LIENG, AND OTHERS IN MARCH. MODERATE AN QUANG LEADERS PREVIOUSLY ON PHAP LAM'S COMMITTEE, SUCH AS SENATOR TON THAT NIEM, REMOVED THEMSELVES BECAUSE, THEY HAVE TOLD US, LAN AND MRS. THANH ARE MORE INTERESTED IN "STRUGGLE" THAN IN NEGOTIATING WITH THE GVN TO FREE THE PRISONERS. THERE IS AMPLE EVIDENCE OF THE DELIBERATE USE OF THIS ISSUE BY MRS. NGO BA THANH AND HER ASSOCIATES TO SEEK A CONFORNTATION WITH THE GVN FOR POLITICAL EFFECT. THIS HAS BEEN MRS. THANH'S OBJECTIVE SINCE HER RELEASE FROM PRISON LAST SEPTEMBER, AND WE JUDGE

THAT FREEING THESE PRISONERS IS ABOUT THE LAST THING THAT INTERESTS HER.

8. OFFICIAL POSITION OF AN QUANG. IN OUR JUDGEMENT, THE AN QUANG HIGH SECULAR COUNCIL, WHICH SPEAKS OFFICIALLY FOR AN QUANG, DOES NOT ENDORSE PHAP LAN'S CAMPAIGN. IT HAS PLAYED THE LARGER ISSUE OF CONFIDENTIAL

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THE REMAINING IMPRISONED BUDDHISTS FROM THE "STRUGGLE" OF 1966 IN A LOW-KEY FASHION FOR OVER A YEAR, AND A CONFRONTATION STRATEGY WOULD ONLY HURT THAT CAUSE. ON THE OTHER HAND, WE DOUBT THAT AN QUANG WILL DISAVOW PHAP LAN OR NHAT HANH. INSTEAD, ITS OFFICIAL STANCE WILL BE AS INVISIBLE AS POSSIBLE, GIVEN ITS OPPOSITIONIST POLITICAL POSITION AND THE FACT THAT IT CANNOT RENOUNCE ITS INTEREST IN THOSE PRISONERS WHOM IT CONSIDERS GENUINE MONKS. (MODERATE AN QUANG SENATOR TRAN QUANG THUAN TOLD AN EMBOFF APRIL 28 THAT HE PERSONALLY IS UNABLE TO REPUDIATE PHAP LAN, SINCE HIS OWN QUIETER APPROACH TO THE GOVERNMENT LAST YEAR WAS BASICALLY UNSUCCESSFUL.) FOR THESE REASONS WE DOUBT THAT THE GVN WILL SUCCEED IN PERSUADING THE HSC TO DISASSOCIATE ITSELF PUBLICLY FROM THE EXTREMISTS WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR AGITATION ABOUT THE ALLEGED 300 MONK PRISONERS (STATE 86008, PARA 4).

9. COMMENT. THE AGITATION ABOUT THE "FASTING" MONKS, THOUGH REPORTED IN THE VIETNAMESE PRESS, HAS ATTRACTED VERY LITTLE ATTENTION IN SAIGON, WHERE THE PUBLIC IS QUITE USED TO SUCH ANTICS BY THIRD FORCERS AND OTHER EXTREMISTS. THE BUDDHIST SOURCES WITH WHOM WE HAVE SPOKEN (SO FAR ONLY AN QUANG) HAVE NOT YET DISCOVERED THAT THIS PUBLICITY STIRRED UP BY PHAP LAN AND MRS. THANH IS CHanneled THROUGH VENERABLE NHAT HANH TO THE US, WHERE IT IS PICKED UP BY AMERICAN ANTI-VIETNAM GROUPS WHO HOPE TO UNDERMINE SUPPORT FOR US AID TO THE RVN.

10. IN CONCLUSION, THE CASE OF THE SO-CALLED MONKS IS SIMILAR TO THE OFT-REPREATED CHARGES ABOUT "POLITICAL PRISONERS" IN SOUTH VIETNAM. THE POINT IS THAT NOBODY IS IN JAIL BECAUSE HE IS A BUDDHIST MONK BUT BECAUSE OF SPECIFIC CHARGES THAT HE FAILED TO RESPOND TO THE DRAFT CALL OR HAS DESERTED WHILE IN MILITARY SERVICE. THE DECENTRALIZED ORGANIZATION OF THE BUDDHIST MOVEMENT IN VIETNAM AND STRICTLY LOCAL RULES ABOUT WHAT CONSTITUTES A MONK WHICH ARE NOT NECESSARILY SHARED BY THE GOVERNMENT CREATE A JUDICIALLY CLOUDY SITUATION WHICH CAN BE EXPLOITED BY THE UNSCRUPULOUS OF WHOM SOUTH VIETNAM HAS ITS SHARE ALSO. THE RECORD SHOWS THAT THE OVERWHELMING NUMBER OF MONKS ARE FREE TO PURSUE THEIR AFFAIRS, HAVE NOT BEEN DRAFTED AND HAVE NO PROBLEMS WITH THE GOVERNMENT.
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